

Frequently Asked Questions About The Tompkins County Unique Natural Areas

Compiled by the

Tompkins County Environmental Management Council Spring, 2001

Internet resources and phone numbers updated Spring, 2005

Definitions

What is a UNA?

An area of outstanding environmental qualities that deserves special attention for preservation in its natural state. UNAs have locally rare plants, animals, or interesting assemblages of plants and animals that are locally uncommon.

What is the UNA database?

The electronic version of the UNA inventory. Because it is digital, it is easily updated.

Why is an area listed as a UNA?

UNAs include one or more of the following characteristics:

- designated area or preserve
- state designated wetland
- contains diverse flora or fauna
- rare or scarce plant or animals
- historical botanical or zoological importance
- geological importance
- important teaching site (e.g. meadow with a diverse array of common plants all in one place)
- old growth woods
- important birding site
- quality of plant or animal community
- recreational value
- scenic vista
- wilderness
- archeological or paleontological site
- cultural or historical importance
- urban greenspace

What does "endangered" mean?

According to the New York State Environmental Conservation Law, section 9-1503, those species with:

- 5 or fewer existing sites
- fewer than 1000 individuals statewide
- restricted to fewer than four USGS 7.5-minute topographic maps, or
- species listed as endangered by the US department of the Interior, as enumerated in the code of Federal Regulation 50 CFR 17.11

What does "threatened" mean?

According to the New York State Environmental Conservation Law, section 9-1503, those species with:

- 6 to fewer than 20 existing sites
- 1000 to fewer than 3000 individuals statewide
- restricted to not less than four, but fewer than seven USGS 7.5-minute topographic maps, or
- species listed as threatened by the US department of the Interior, as enumerated in the code of Federal Regulation 50 CFR 17.11

What does "rare" mean?

According to the New York State Environmental Conservation Law, section 9-1503, those species with:

- 20 to 35 existing sites, or
- 3000 to 5000 individuals statewide

What does "exploitatively vulnerable" mean?

According to the New York State Environmental Conservation Law, section 9-1503, those species that are likely to become threatened in the near future throughout all or a significant portion of their range within the state if causal factors continue unchecked.

How do you define "unique?"

There are several criteria for uniqueness that were used in this inventory:

- Important natural community
- Quality of example
- Rare or scarce animal or plant
- Geologically important
- Aesthetic value

What is a DEC wetland?

New York State Freshwater Wetlands are already known and surveyed by the Department of Environmental Conservation to characterize soil conditions; standing water part of all of the year, or high water table; and presence of wetland plants

I've never heard of the species that the UNA mentioned is on my property. How do I find out more about it?

Check your local bookstore or amazon.com for natural history guides to plants, birds, or geology. Frequently, the Cornell Plantations, the Cayuga Bird Club, the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, the Finger Lakes Land Trust, Cooperative Extension, and the Native Plant Society of the Finger Lakes offer hikes or lectures about the natural history of our area.

How do I know where the UNA boundaries really are when I walk my property?

Boundaries are approximate, and are based on interpretation of air photos, trees or other vegetation, or other physical characteristics (e.g., an old stone wall) found there.

Development of the document

Why

Why was it developed?

To catalog the important natural features of the county for use in site plan reviews, and for the general education of the public. The inventory is designed to make people aware of the valuable plants and animals or land features that may not be obvious to them.

Why did you generate this report?

So that planners and property owners and could have easy access to the information.

Drawing the boundaries

How did you determine this land was part of a UNA?

Nancy Ostman and Robert Wesley, both botanists at the Cornell Plantations, are very familiar with the county. They collected field data, used historic data, aerial photo and topographic map analysis of the elevation, vegetation and soils maps, hydrological maps.

Did you trespass on my land to get this information?

Properties were visited only with landowner permission. Some properties were viewed from the road.

How were the boundaries done? How were the boundaries determined?

Use of site maps, and then more intensive review with additional details, spatial data from air photos, topo maps, 20 foot topographic map contours, streams, building footprints, etc. Field data collected 1990-2000.

What effect on the boundaries does moving water through the UNA have?

Boundaries of UNAs should be drawn to include existing and former stream channels.

Rating process

How does the database rate UNAs in terms of their "uniqueness"?

There is information from which a ranking system can be developed, but this has not yet been done.

Review process

I think the boundaries must be wrong! There is nothing but weeds out there! Can someone fix this?

Read the document closely. What may appear to be weeds in a general sense may be communities of wildflowers that include some rare or scarce species. Nevertheless, you may be right. The boundaries were drawn on a somewhat gross scale, and may be off in some places. What is most important is the protection of the UNA as a whole, and part of this involves the protection of some buffer zones around the core UNA.

How do I get this changed if I think it is wrong?

Call the Tompkins County Planning Department.

Staff qualifications

Who determined that these should be UNAs?

Consultants included professional geologists, botanists, naturalists, animal scientists, foresters, and ecologists.

What are the qualifications of the people who prepared the UNA database (i.e., how do we promote the credibility of the document)?

Professional field botanists from Cornell and The Nature Conservancy, professional geologists, naturalists, and professional planners were involved in the decisions.

Availability of the document

How does one get a map of the UNAs?

The full document is in the Tompkins County Library, the local town libraries, and the town offices in Tompkins County. Most UNAs are on private property, so it is imperative that landowner permission must be granted before any of these privately-owned UNAs may be visited.

Can I get a detailed map of the UNA at least partly on my land showing where the rare or special plants/animals are?

No, this information does not exist.

Where can I call to get more information in the future?

Call the Tompkins County Planning Department.

Use of the document

By municipalities

How do we (municipality) use this information?

The document is most useful in informing permit reviews, determination of conservation zones, general public education, and in reviewing the potential impacts of development in the preparation of State Environmental Quality Review (SEQR) forms.

If this report is not regulatory, how will county government use it?

For decisions on purchases of open space, site plan reviews, and informing municipalities about details of county land up for auction.

Do the town, village, and/or county planning board, or the DEC, have to take the presence of UNAs into consideration when working on master or long term plans?

Yes.

How do Town Boards and Planning Boards acquire the information to include it in planning and zoning decisions?

Each municipality has a copy of the entire document. Further questions about sites can be addressed to the Tompkins County Planning Department.

How is inter-municipal planning to be done if UNAs cross county or town lines?

This still needs to be worked out between towns. Upstream/downstream issues are especially important in assessing the environmental impacts created by each municipality.

What about those on county or town properties, such as at the airport?

This should be factored in the management plans for these properties.

By the public

How do I access the UNA database?

All database information is included in the written report. Most information will not change unless additional field site visits are scheduled, and full reviews are possible. Currently, none is planned.

Publicity plan

How can I get someone to come to my planning/development/etc.board meeting to present information about the UNAs?

These meetings took place during the summer and fall of 2000. Additional visits may be scheduled by request.

Does the landowner know that he or she owns a UNA?

By the end of August 2000, every landowner should have been notified by mail.

Property ownership issues

Taxes

Will this affect my taxes?

Currently, no.

Can I get a tax credit since a UNA might lower the market value of my land?

Currently, no.

Will I get a tax break?

Currently, none are available.

Can I get a reduction on my taxes if I have a UNA at least partly on my land?

Currently, none are available.

Property value

Will it increase the value of my property?

Currently, this is unclear, although in some locales, a UNA would be a strong selling point.

Will there be any problems when I want to sell my property?

This is highly unlikely. In fact, the presence of a UNA could be a positive selling point for some properties.

Privacy

If this document is public, how can I keep people from trespassing onto my UNA?

Post your land.

Do I have to let in any one who wants to look at it?

No.

Will the designation mean that I have to grant access to anyone?

No.

Will this designation lead to people wanting to come on my land to see what's here?

Probably not, but even if someone shows up, remember that permission is required before visiting private property.

Will I eventually loose control over that part of my property?

No.

Future land use/development

Does this mean I can't build on (sell, develop, drain) my land?

If you have a wetland on your property that is regulated by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, there may be restrictions on the use of this land. Your right to sell your property, however, is not restricted.

Will having a UNA on my land stop me from developing my land or using a certain part of my property?

This will depend on recommendations of your municipal planning board, and whether or not the property is a state-designated wetland.

I planned to build on this site. How does this affect the issuing of a building permit?

This depends on the decisions of the municipal planning board.

Is there any legislation or guidelines regarding development on UNAs?

Government does not regulate UNAs unless they have already been mapped by the DEC as wetlands. The UNA inventory does provide information that may assist municipal planning boards in their decision-making.

What does it mean if I have a UNA on my property or have plans to develop/change a UNA?

The inventory provides general information to the local planning boards. As part of the permit review process, your board may require you to modify your plans to take into account the presence of the UNA.

If a UNA crosses my land and a neighbor's land, can I stop the neighbor from doing something that will affect the UNA if I wish to preserve it, or vice versa?

Legally, no. But neighbors can always talk to each other to decide on land use questions.

Will the presence of a UNA on my land inhibit my usage of herbicides and/or pesticides?

Only if you choose to. In many cases, whether there is a UNA present or not, it is advisable to limit use of herbicides and pesticides. Consider Integrated Pest Management techniques. Consult your Cooperative Extension agent for more information.

Will it affect my rights to use this land for animal pasturing?

Only if you choose to. There are initiatives that supply funding for watershed protection. Contact the Tompkins County Soil and Water Conservation District for more information.

Will I be eligible for assistance if the UNA is disturbed by, for example, beaver; or if my leaving it alone encourages fox and/or coyote populations?

Currently, no.

Legal status

Can/should I still permit hunting, etc.?

This is up to you.

This is a DEC wetland and now the boundaries look different from that. Why do they keep changing?

The UNA boundaries include some buffer lands outside of the actual wet part of the wetland. Also, forested wetlands may not have been included in the original DEC wetland-mapping scheme.

Am I required to preserve the UNA?

No, but it would be a great idea to do this!

What right do you have to tell everyone what's on my land?

Not everyone has been told what is on your land. Almost all people using this inventory will be doing so to answer specific questions about land use planning.

Management suggestions

How can I ensure more permanent protection on my property now that I know that it contains some important species or ecological communities?

There are several options available to help landowners permanently protect their land, including conservation easements and land donations. For more information see the Land Protection Options handbook.

There are rare plants/animals listed for my site. Am I supposed to do something to protect them?

Try to learn to recognize them, and limit heavy use of these areas if you can.

How can I help protect the unique things on my land?

Become familiar with these unique features. Advocate for sustainable and sensitive forestry and agricultural practices. Look into organic farming or gardening or Integrated Pest Management options. Set aside buffer areas around sensitive zones. Monitor changes that take place on the land. Report any unusual changes to the Cornell Plantations or the Tompkins County Planning Department.

OTHER RESOURCES

Web pages of interest

Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology Birdsource Program

<http://www.birdsource.com/>

New York State Reptile and Amphibian Atlas Project

<http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/wildlife/herp/index.html>

Cornell Plantations

<http://www.plantations.cornell.edu/>

Cayuga Nature Center

<http://www.cayuganaturecenter.org/>

Cortland Herpetology Connection

<http://www.cortland.edu/herp/>

NYS Natural Heritage Program

<http://www.dec.state.ny.us/website/dfwmr/heritage/>

Field guide information

Favorite Field Guides summary

<http://my.erinet.com/jwoolf/guides.html>

Acorn Naturalists field guide collection on-line nature books store

<http://www.acornnaturalists.com/store>

Amazon.com selected outdoors and nature field guides

<http://www.amazon.com/>

eNature.com on-line field guides to numerous topics

<http://enature.com/>

The Compleat Naturalist supplies for the naturalist

<http://compleatnaturalist.com/>

Contact phone numbers

Tompkins County Planning Department (607) 274-5560

New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Cortland office (607) 753-3095

For wetlands regulations questions, press Ext. 206

Finger Lakes Land Trust (607) 275-9487

Cornell Plantations Natural Areas Program (607) 255-9638
United States Geological Survey (607) 266-0217
Tompkins County Soil and Water Conservation District (607) 257-2340
United States Natural Resources Conservation Survey (607) 257-2340
Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County (607) 272-2292

Interesting publications on geology and fossils of the area

Geology of New York: A simplified account (Y.W. Isachsen and others, 1991, New York State Museum Educational leaflet no. 28)

Roadside Geology of New York (B. Van Diver, 1985, Mountain Press Publishing)

The Finger Lakes Region: its origin and nature (O.D. von Engeln, 1988, Cornell University Press)

Lasting Impressions: a guide to understanding fossils in the Northeastern United States (K. Edelstein, 1999, Cornell Cooperative Extension)

MacMillan Field Guide to Fossils (R. Moody, 1986, Collier Books)

Audubon Society Pocket Guide to Familiar Fossils (S. Horenstein, 1988, Alfred A. Knopf)